Houdini and The Space Cuckoos

By Joseph Lidster

Part Three

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As the demonic horse and its carriage bore down on them, Harry slammed himself at the nearest door, crashing through into the empty building along with the Doctor just as the deadly hooves and wheels rattled passed. Inside, they found themselves in what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse. It was dusty and grim but, thankfully, free of anyone with purple eyes. Outside, they could hear the horse neighing angrily.

The Doctor looked shocked. 'Language!'

Harry raised an eyebrow.

'Now, I've been thinking that we need a change of plan Harry.'

'We had a plan?'

'Yeah, well, we sort of had a plan. We need to stop worrying about what's down here and head straight to the heart of the matter.'

Harry thought about it and realised what the Doctor meant. 'You mean you want us to go up to their spaceship?'

The Doctor nodded.

'Won't that mean going back to the theatre and using your… TARDIS?'

The Doctor shook his head, took out his sonic screwdriver and pointed it up at the roof of the warehouse. Another ear-piercing noise rang out. The Doctor shouted over the noise, 'They want us! So let them come and get us!'

Harry was about to point out that that's exactly what the Cuculus had been trying to do all this time but before he could, there was an explosion of bright white light and everything went black.

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Harry woke up. He was in a small metal space. Alone in the dark. He wondered if he was back in the safe again. Had he woken up after a bad dream? Were the audience outside, still waiting for him to escape? He slowly began to sit up when he realised that there was a light coming from somewhere. And then he realised that he could actually stand up. And then he realised that he wasn't in the safe on the stage at the Golden Horse Theatre. And he knew this because, when he stood up to his full height, he could see a window. And through that window, he could see the planet Earth.

Harry Houdini was in space.

He didn't mind admitting to himself that he was scared but he reasoned that there was no use in panicking. He needed to break out of the cell and find the Doctor. The Doctor would know what to do.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, Harry noticed everything seemed to be made of a strange purple metal. And everything was silent except for the hum of a distant engine. He went over to the cell door and looked at the strange alien lock. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before.

Thirty six seconds later, Harry stepped through the door. It had taken him less time to figure out the curiously formed alien pin-tumbler than it had to escape the suspended straightjacket trick or the metal vat in his Milk Can Escape.

As he edged along the corridors, Harry slowly became aware of a distant voice up ahead. The familiar babbling was getting closer and closer. Harry started running.

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Well Bob, I'm not planning on dying inside a purple spaceship in 1920.

Now you might have noticed a couple of things. Number one! I said earlier that I travel alone. Mostly. Because, yes, at this precise moment, I'm mostly travelling alone. But on this one occasion, up here, up to this spaceship, I've actually brought a friend with me. And, yes, that's him entering the room and climbing on top of the box, fiddling with the locks right now.

And number two? I said there's practically nobody in the cosmos who can deactivate a deadlock seal. But there's one man, my friend up there, who can unlock anything! He's broken out of handcuffs and chains and the belly of a whale! He eats deadlock seals for breakfast!

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So yes, my feathered captors, that's why I've been talking to the imaginary Bob here. Because I knew you'd be listening in, and I knew that would distract you long enough to allow my friend up there to break me out of this actually-filling-up-quite-quickly-so-if-you-could-hurry-up-and-get-me-out-of-here box of yours.

And with a final twist, the deadlock seal came apart and the glass box opened. The Doctor leapt out, gloop sloshing everywhere.

'Well done, Harry! Maybe don't leave it quite so long next time. These trousers are ruined!'

Harry shook the Doctor’s hand, delighted to see him alive and well. He hadn’t expected to find him talking to himself in what looked like a glass death trap, but now they were safely reunited. Only after a moment did he realise they were no longer alone in the room.

'Now, allow me to introduce you! Captors, this is my friend, Mr Harry Houdini! Harry Houdini, these are my captors, the Space Cuckoos! Yes, I know. They're giant birds. Don't stare.'

Harry tried not to stare at the aliens but they were just so strange. They were about the same height as the Doctor but they were birds. Big birds. Wings, claws, beaks, the lot. But they were birds with glowing purple eyes. The Doctor explained that they'd been trying to drain his knowledge of Earth and the Universe.

'I mean, you could have just asked me,' he said to the Cuckoos. 'But no, you had to go and cover me in brain-draining gloop! It had better wash out!'

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The Cuckoos started to advance on them. Surrounding them. It reminded Harry of the reporters in the theatre. Except this lot had wings. And claws. And breaks that snapped and squawked! The Doctor was still busy brushing down his trousers and babbling about how he'd have to find a new pair so Harry just grabbed his hand and started to run, dragging the Doctor behind him.

They ran down corridor after corridor, the sound of screeching giant birds, with their huge flapping wings, following them. Somehow, as they ran, the Doctor managed to take the lead and, soon, he was dragging Harry.

'Through here,' the Doctor shouted as he pulled Harry into a huge chamber. They stopped running and Harry looked around the room, awestruck. It was huge. Bigger than huge. It was massive. The walls, as with the rest of the spaceship, were purple. They were pulsating, like a heartbeat. And, standing against the walls, silent and motionless, were hundreds of Cuckoos.

'Are they dead?' asked Harry.

'No, no,' replied the Doctor. 'They're... asleep. It's perfectly safe.'

Harry didn't believe that the Doctor really understood the meaning of the word 'safe'. 'Is this spaceship... alive?'

The Doctor nodded. 'It's not just a spaceship. It's the Cuckoos' entire world.'

'So it's more of an egg than a spaceship?'

The Doctor grinned. 'It's a bit like an egg, yeah, Harry! And that's no yoke!' He paused. 'Yoke? Joke? No?' The Doctor shrugged and strode over to a structure in the centre of the room. Harry followed.

At first, it looked like a giant violet crystal but, as they got closer to it, Harry realised it was actually made up of thousands of tiny crystals, most of which were glowing. It was beautiful.

'This is what they use to control people,' explained the Doctor. 'Each of these crystals holds the consciousness of a single Cuckoo.'

'And those that are glowing, they still have a Cuckoo's mind in?'

'Got it in one, Harry! And the sleeping Cuckoos in this room, they're crystals are empty because their consciousnesses have been projected down to earth. Possessing the people. And the horses.'

Harry stared at the empty crystals. So many people. He gulped as he looked around at the sleeping Cuckoos. 'So, what do we do?'

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The Doctor was already fiddling with his sonic screwdriver. The green light shone onto the violet crystals. 'I could explain in great detail but basically I'm reversing the psychic flow so that each Cuckoo consciousness is returned back into the crystals.'

And, as Harry watched, more and more of the crystals started to flicker and glow with life. Each new glowing crystal meant another person on Earth was free. But with each new glowing crystal, a Cuckoo in the room started to stir. Their eyes slowly blinking as they woke up. Harry could also hear the other Cuckoos – the awake ones – getting closer. They were screeching with rage as they flew towards the chamber. It was like being in a monster picture.

'Doctor!'

'I know! We should get out of here,' the Doctor replied. 'I have done this sort of thing before...' Before he could do anything else, though, the giant Cuckoos suddenly flew into the room and surrounded them! Quickly, the Doctor sent the crystals smashing to the ground. They exploded across the floor like glass and each of the remaining sleeping Cuckoos woke up. All of the Cuckoos started to advance, squawking wildly at them and flapping their wings! Harry and the Doctor stood back-to-back, with nowhere to run.

'Now, wait, before you do anything silly or painful,' said the Doctor, 'you should check your databases! While I was in your glass box I let you take some of the knowledge from my mind. Just a little. A few little clues as to other ways in which your race can survive! Some tips on building robots! The location of a race of symbiotic creatures who'd welcome some

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big bird brains! Just a few solutions so that you don't have to go around the Universe planting your minds into innocent people! And horses!'

One of the Cuckoos stepped forward and cocked its head. It looked strangely comical, reminding Harry of the pigeons that flew and waddled through New York. The Cuckoo chirped. Two other Cuckoos chirped back at it. Then they all turned to look at the Doctor and Harry again. They all opened their beaks and suddenly-

In a flash of white light, Harry and the Doctor found themselves once more in the lobby of the Golden Horse Theatre. Harry stood there for a moment and breathed in deeply. The taste of New York filled his lungs. He was home again.

'Is that it?' he asked the Doctor.

The Doctor nodded then looked at his watch. 'We've got to get you back into that safe!'

And before Harry could argue or even try to comprehend what had just happened, he found himself being dragged back into the Doctor's blue box and across the impossible control room. Before he could say anything, the Doctor was pushing him through the glowing circle in the wall and into the safe. He struggled to turn to face him but the Doctor shook his head!

'Quickly!! You've got to get out of the safe! I've set the TARDIS for two minutes after the safe door shut, so the audience won't have been waiting long. Now go!' He turned away from Harry and stood with his back facing him.

'What are you doing?'

The Doctor stuck his fingers in his ears and shouted. 'I don't want to know how you do it! I don't want to spoil the magic!'

And, just a few seconds later, Harry reached back and gave the Doctor a gentle kick. The Doctor turned to face him and watched, a big grin spreading across his face as Harry pushed the safe door open. The audience, on the other side of the safe, started to applaud as Harry pulled himself free. He hauled himself onto the stage. The lady in the sequinned dress waddled over to him and held up her arms and the audience started to cheer. Harry risked a glance back at the safe and saw the Doctor's face poking through. He was grinning. The audience were grinning. The lady in the sequinned dress was grinning. And Harry Houdini was grinning. He'd saved the world!

But...

Suddenly, the lady next to him started to cough. And a few members of the audience started to cough. And then a few more. Harry looked out at them, confused. He turned back to look at the Doctor. The Doctor pulled himself out of the TARDIS and out of the safe onto the stage!

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'What's happening?' asked Harry, terrified.

'They're dying!' The Doctor took a deep breath then pulled a disgusted face. 'A virus! The Cuckoos - they knew they'd lost so they've released a virus!' He quickly pulled out his sonic screwdriver and scanned Harry. 'It's us! They've infected us!'

Coming Soon: The Fourth and Final Part!

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